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Albums from Kenny Rogers, left, Barbra Streisand, above, and David Bowie, right, are among the Christmas "Superstar products" battling the Grinches of slumps and setbacks.

TOP 40: PICKS TO CLICK AS CHRSTMAS GIFTS

The music industry, believing we need yet more encouragement, is preparing to intensify its "Gift of Music" program—a campaign designed to get the consuming and gifting juices flowing. Meantime, what they call "superstar product" is rolling into the stores at an unprecedented rate. Despite slumps and setbacks, a lot of records will be sold this Chrstmas season.

In an effort to guide the overwhelmed music fan through the clogged aisles, we present a summary of The Times' pop-music critics' opinions of the current best-sellers. The Top 40 list is based on Billboard magazine's Dec. 13 national album chart. The comments are based on original reviews, not staff consensus.

Contributing to the roundup: Robert Hilburn, Dennis Hunt, Richard Cromelin, Steve Pond, Don Snowden, Terry Atkinson, Kristine McKenna, Connie Johnson, Paul Grein, Patrick Goldstein, John Mendelssohn, Richard Meltzer and Mikal Gilmore.

Ratings: Three stars, outstanding; two stars, good; one star, ho-hum.

1. ★ ★ "Greatest Hits," Kenny Rogers. Liberty LOO-1072. All phases of Rogers' career are covered on this well-timed retrospective, from a pair of 1969 First Edition hits to the singer's current smash, "Lady." There is a certain singsong blandness to several of the tunes, but at his best, Rogers achieves a subtle, endearing grace.

2. ★ ★ "Guilty," Barbra Streisand. Columbia FC 36750. Barry Gibb produced, and while several cuts have an unmistakable Bee Gees imprint, it never overshadows Streisand's own style. In the past few years, Streisand has teamed with several top record stars for joint projects; the match with Gibb is the most satisfying

3. ★ ★ ★ "Hotter Than July," Stevie Wonder. Tamla T8-373M1 (Motown). Wonder has followed the solemn "Secret Life of Plants" with an LP that aims for plain old festiveness. A powerful pop/R&B package filled with danceable songs, constructed around marvelous hooks.

4. ★ ★ ★ "The River," Bruce Springsteen. Columbia PC 236854. Has a cumulative impact as strong as "Born to Run," and its painstakingly constructed tracks pack much of the gut-level punch and immediacy of Springsteen's live performances. At first, it simply sounds like Springsteen's party record, but eventually a remarkable cohesion, consistency and depth emerge.

5. ★ "Back in Black," AC/DC. Atlantic SD 16018. New vocalist Brian Johnson sounds like a singer who should have waited to record until he'd gotten over laryngitis, and the heavy-metal songs here are among the most uninspired by a group that had never had a whole lot to offer in the first place.

6. ★ ★ "Crimes of Passion," Pat Benatar. Chrysalis CHE 1275. Keith Olsen's production is too predictable and unimaginative. The LP's highlights come when Benatar drops her tough-girl pose—on these exceptions, we get a glimpse of her real potential.

7. ★ ★ "Eagles Live," the Eagles. Asylum BB-705. Has more than enough of the familiar hits, and also includes two Joe Walsh tunes, an acoustic number that wasn't on any Eagles albums and three singles that never were released as singles. The mix stresses concert dynamics, so play it loud.

8. ★ "Zenyatta Mondatta," the Police. A&M SP 4831. It sounds as if the band's touring schedule didn't allow time to write and arrange new songs. This consists mostly of lightweight excursions through typical Police territory and atmospheric drones that take the band too far from its rhythmic strength.

9. ★ ★ "The Game," Queen. Elektra 5E 513. Except for the title track, this LP is less ambitious and grandiose than most Queen albums. That's good and bad. The best tunes are catchy and compact. Other tracks, however, don't back up the band's renewed energy with much thematic imagination.

10. ★ ★ ★ "Faces," Earth, Wind & Fire. ARC KC-2-36795 (Columbia). EWF has stopped testing the boundaries of R&B and settled into a groove. While its pop/R&B isn't as challenging as its '70s music, this slick, ultraromantic LP is one of the year's best R&B records.

11. ★ ★ "The Jazz Singer" (sound track), Neil Diamond. Capitol SWAV-12120. Diamond ups the tempo and has some fun, and many of the songs recapture the punchy energy and drive of his early hits. His best album since 1976's "Beautiful Noise."

12. ★ "Double Fantasy," John Lennon/Yoko Ono. Geffen GHS 2001 (Warner Bros.). In what may be his final studio collection, the late John Lennon teams up with Yoko Ono for a male-female dialogue that touches on the strains of modern relationships but shows only in part the power of Lennon's most satisfying works.

13. ★ ★ ★ "Gaucho," Steely Dan. MCA MCA-6102. "Gaucho" is not quite so lush as "Aja," but it's even more finely tuned, and the lyrics mark a welcome return to full-blown narratives after "Aja's" fragmented approach. A brew of pretty poison that's close to "The Royal Scam" as Steely Dan's most effective concoction.

14. ★ ★ ★ "Greatest Hits/Live," Heart. Epic KE 2-3688. Recent developments in rock have taken some of the shine off this odd album—a double LP in which one disc is a greatest-hits collection, the other a jumble of live and new studio tracks. It nicely summarizes Heart's strengths, but does little to advance its cause.

15. ★ ★ ★ "Triumph," the Jacksons. Epic FE 36424. Despite the high anxiety of the themes and music, none of the exuberance has gone out of the Jacksons' repertoire. The LP reaffirms the group's ability to put its personal stamp on the most polished pop gloss.

16. ★ ★ "Anne Murray's Greatest Hits," Anne Murray. Capitol SOO-12110. It is to Murray's credit that she waited until she had an album's worth of bonafide hits to issue her first singles compilation—even if it did take 10 years. The songs, neatly sequenced in precise chronological order, showcase Murray's understated but heartfelt vocals.

17. ★ ★ ★ "Greatest Hits," the Doors. Elektra 5E-515. The Doors' continuing popularity attests to its position as one of America's premier rock bands, and this is a thoroughly representative collection. The selections are predictably geared toward the group's best-known material, but there aren't any glaring omissions or inappropriate choices. An essential introduction.

18. ★ ★ ★ "Foolish Behaviour," Rod Stewart. Warner Bros. HS 3485. After "Blondes Have More Fun," Stewart looked like a candidate for the garbage

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